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S04R Western Sahara 2009

By Antonio Gonzalez, EA5RM

The permanent smile of the Saharais, their hospitality and form of life in such a hostile environment leaves an indelible mark on my memory. Really, this trip has served to help me find the answer to many questions, realizing how insignificant we humans are, in spite of how powerful we consider ourselves to be. I have learned the meaning of borders which we try so hard to delimit and draw on maps, mere marks on paper which have provoked wars and disputes throughout history, lines that are just that, lines on a paper, because the desert doesn't understand borders; the only border is the limitless horizon which extends in front of you.

... It took me three more days to realize why this vast and arid extension of the planet grabs and hypnotizes you, changing you into a slave of its landscape, its silence and starry nights; it's a sentiment impossible to describe in words and that makes you feel like you are in paradise in spite of finding yourself, in the beginning, in a part that feels like Hell itself.

... As I said before, this expedition will stay in my memory for many reasons, but the most important is for having learned



The "Tifariti Gang" stops long enough to pose for a picture after raising the INDEXA colors. Front row: Alain (F6ENO), Agustin (EA1KY), Mahafud (S01MZ), and Antonio (EA5RM). Back row: Fabrizio (IN3ZNR), Bernard (F9IE), Valery (UT7CR), Manolo (EA7AJR), Roberto (EA2RY) and Saharawi Driver.

one of the greatest lessons of my life: The happiest man is not the one who has the most, but the one who needs the least."

--S05X An international Adventure (DXCC Yearbook 2003) by Antonio González EA5RM

Before getting into the details of the S04R DXpedition, I wanted to rediscover the paragraphs I wrote six years ago following my participation in the S05X DXpedition. S05X was my very first trip to Western Sahara, a unique experience which entranced me and to this day is always on my mind. The lessons learned then are still with me.

Shortly after our 2008 Rwanda DXpedition, I began to make plans for the next "Tifariti Gang" project. After conversations with Fabrizio, IN3ZNR, about alternatives for our next destination, we reached the conclusion of going to an entity which had not been active due to its social and political complexity so that it would be quite

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high on the "most wanted" list.

Immediately after explaining the plans to the rest of my team, they all became very enthusiastic—all of them "signed up" for the new adventure which was fixed for the first quarter of 2009.

After having taken the first steps to organize our project and due to reasons I cannot explain, we decided to postpone our plans until 2010. However, none of our team members were resigned to spend a whole year without doing an expedition—you might say they all forced me to search for alternatives. Once again Fabrizio and I restudied all possible options, but in all of the cases, several months of arrangements would be needed. Therefore, because we were familiar with running an expedition to Western Sahara, we decided our plans to return there in 2012 should be moved up to satisfy the thirst of our team.

Since time was tight, we all got to work and as expected, problems appeared from the very first minute. We were fortunate to be able to solve them all because part of my technique in organizing a radio operation is to do as thorough job as I can to enumerate all the things that may go wrong. For all those things that I identify, I try to trace an alternative, named "Plan B", which allows me to keep going. Regretfully, every time I design a journey to the Sahara, the list of things that may go wrong is always multiplied by two and the chances to have a "Plan B" for every possible occurrence is miniscule.

Yet, after a few weeks of frenetic work, thousands of emails and phone calls, we were able to get all the necessary materials assembled as well as to establish a group of operators who would bring our project to a good end. The team members were Agustin (EA1KY), Roberto (EA2RY), Manolo (EA7AJR), Alain (F6ENO), Bernard (F9IE), Fabrizio (IN3ZNR), Valery (UT7CR), and myself (EA5RM). Dima UY7CW, Juanjo EA1CJ and Gerard EA3EXV were on the team but had to withdraw at the last minute due to unexpected problems with their jobs.

As on previous occasions, the trip to the desert would begin in Elche, which is my hometown. From here we could take advantage of the charter flights which depart from our local airport destined for the refugee camps in southern Algeria. This time, the flight was scheduled between the 12th and 18th of April, a fact that dictated an operation of only 5 days.

Besides that, of the 5 operating days, none were on a Saturday or Sunday which we felt would affect the number of QSOs.

On April 11th, 24 hours before departure, the whole team met in Elche, including Valery (UT7CR) who had just landed in Madrid the day before, straight from Siberia. Obviously it took him just 2 minutes to get used to our warm Mediterranean climate. Not surprisingly, it took only a little more time for Valery to become integrated into our group.

On departure day with valuable help from our local team of collaborators all our equipment was delivered to the airport. Yet, it was at boarding time when we faced the biggest problem, and I felt myself on the edge of hopelessness. The weight and volume of our equipment far exceeded the limits of the aircraft capacity, and we felt sure that part of our bulky load might not be loaded on board. Luck was with us once again, partially due to the help of Air Algerian staff, who somehow managed to get all our checked luggage and hand luggage on board.

After a quiet flight with just a stop in Oran, by early morning of Sunday 12th we landed in Tindouf in western Algeria where Mahafud S01MZ, telecommunications Chief Director of Arab Saharawi Democratic Republic, was waiting for us. It was Mahafud who made all logistic arrangements for our drive to the desert. Right after a short break for relaxing at the Telecom HQ in Rabuni (capital city of exiled Saharawi people in Algeria), we left for Tifariti in the free territories with three 4WD vehicles on a drive that can never be considered routine. On this trip,

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our route to Tifariti passed very close to dozens of mine fields. Unexploded mortar grenades and 155mm shells served as silent witnesses to the recent war between Saharawi Polisario and Morocco. On our way to our destination we also drove near to the largest, yet virtually unknown, wall on the planet built by Morocco years ago. It is a 1,800 kilometre wall dividing the two Sahara territories from North to South. We were troubled to learn that a couple of



Everyone needs a break at some time during eight hours of bouncing along on a trackless, stone-filled path across the desert terrain.

days before our arrival, a young Sahara boy lost one of his legs in an unfortunate accident with a mine which was positioned near the wall.

After eight unforgettable hours of driving across 400 kilometres of pure desert without roads or even tracks, we finally arrived at Tifariti in late afternoon of April 12th. Taking advantage of the few remaining daylight hours and with no time to rest, we assembled the 80 meter CW antenna and raised vertical antennas for 30meters and 40 meters. At the same time other team members assembled four operating positions in the room which was to be our “shack” during the whole operation using ICOM IC-7000 transceivers—our favourite DXpedition rig. Three out of the four stations were going to be equipped with linear amplifiers. As soon as we finished assembling the 30 meter antenna, F9IE began with the first S04R calls, and he suddenly encountered a huge pile-up. Then, just at sunset, F6ENO started operation on 80 CW.

Despite our fatigue from the long journey, we decided on our operating shifts, determined to keep at least two active stations on the low bands the first night. Regretfully, and due to a coordination failure with the person in charge of the village power generator, we lost electrical power right after midnight. Obviously we were forced to go QRT.

When electricity was restored in the morning, we were back on the air again with a single station. Meanwhile the rest of the team divided in several groups to finish installing our antennas. About two hours after sunrise we had our HF top-bands Hex-beam five band antenna ready. Shortly after this, our 5 band directional Spider Beam was hauled up on top of the tower we had assembled and left behind during S05X operation back in 2003. Late evening on the same day, we finished the assembly of our antenna “farm” with the 160 meter inverted L and two 200 meters long Beverage antennas. The last antenna to go up was the inverted L for 80 meters SSB, made with the fibre tube for 15 meters kindly donated to us by Proyecto4. In order to avoid and



Agustin (EA1KY) and Alain (F6ENO) man two of our four stations in the early going.

minimize the losses caused by the extremely dry and stony ground, both 80 and 160 meter vertical antennas were provided with radials using around a thousand meters of wire.

Regular operating shifts began right after all antennas were finally assembled. Our plan to have 4 stations on the air at all times, whenever power genera-

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tors allowed us to do so. This time, besides the Tifariti Village power generator, we planned to use an additional one from the RASD army as the village generator runs only a few hours per day and regretfully it was close to the end of its useful life. As a result, we were finding only 180 volts arriving to the shack, a fact that extremely limited the output power of the amplifiers. This energy shortfall forced us to turn down one or two of our linear amplifiers.

On our "day two" of operation, the power generator from RASD army was finally lent to us, using it for 11 hours a day and the Tifariti's village generator during the rest of the time. Due to the hard conditions of the desert, the military personnel gave us very specific instructions about the working time periods for both generators. They had to be stopped at least one hour per day for maintenance. That was the reason for our daily stop between 00.00 and 01.00 UTC and 14.00-15.00 UTC.



A "portable" generator supplied by the RASD Army supplemented the Tifariti village generator and helped to resolve electrical energy shortfalls.

Once the electricity supply problems were fully solved, the radio operation started running as a perfectly synchronized precision engine. The CW-team composed of EA7AJR, F6ENO, F9IE and UT7CR were constantly serving the pile-up while EA2RY was making his shift on RTTY. The team of "phoners", EA1KY, IN3ZNR and EA5RM, did the same on the SSB segments, giving priority to Japan and North America when propagation, time, and conditions were optimal for these two destinations.

Our pilot EA5BZ was forwarding me on a daily basis all comments from hams around the world while I was letting him know about our operational status and having him pass traffic to our families.

Despite the long and hard drive crossing the desert, the hard and continuous work with the antenna and equipment assembly, the tiring operating shifts to keep a 22 hour per day vigil, the roughness of the place and despite many other smaller nuisances, none of us ever lost the smile on our faces, and we all were always ready to help each other whatever the need would be, providing skills we had and being a solid and integrated team.

The pile-ups were very strong on all bands. The propagation on the high-bands was below average, but it clearly improved during the last 2 days of operation, when we noticed openings on 10 and 12 meters for Southern Europe mostly. Nevertheless, we were able to give a new one using those two bands to a lot of stations. The propagation with North America and Japan went the way we expected for this time of the solar cycle. Our final score with Japan was better than on previous occasions, mostly due to the use of low radiation angle antennas on 40m and overall on 30m.

Our antenna farm as well as the radio shack was placed inside the same barracks complex which we used previously for S05X and S01R in 2003 and 2006, respectively. Our location in the old Spanish colonial village of Tifariti is generally higher than the surrounding terrain offering us a beautiful view of desert landscape and clear takeoff angles.

The weather was quite cold with a constant wind blowing from Northwest. Because of this, antenna assembly, repair and takedown was never pleasant. Dark nights with no moon, brought us a magnificent sight which is quite difficult to see in other parts of the world. But here, far away from anywhere, in the middle of the desert with its extremely dry wind, we were able to enjoy Tifariti's amazing starry sky with such splendorous vault of firmament that the immensity takes one's breath away. And, when the generators stopped during the night the only man-made lighting pollution in sight was a single point from a United Nations military camp 8 kilometers south of us.

The blue-helmeted UN troops stationed in the camp to our south always visited us during past DXpedi-

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tions, showing a great interest in our activity. We didn't have a visit from the UN troops this time. We understood that they might be busy based on the continuous operations of their big MI17 helicopters.

During the second to last day of operation, we organized a visit to the Rekeiz cave, which is located 30 kilometers west from Tifariti. The cave paintings therein were made 3500 years ago by our forefathers and many of them showed haunting scenes of a time when the dead and arid desert on which we now stood was full of life and a colorful forest.

Early morning on April 17th, we started removing the antennas, starting with the Beverages and inverted L's for 80 and 160 SSB. The Spiderbeam was taken down right before sunset the same day in order to have it available for as long as possible on the bands for which it worked best. Meanwhile, the Hex-Beam kept on working North American stations in top bands until the last minute when we stopped hearing them on 20 meters close to our midnight time. From that moment on, we kept two stations on the air, both on 30 meters until the band closure, then continuing on 20 meters and 80 meters.

The last station to go QRT was 80 meters CW operated by UT7CR. We had asked him to keep turning out QSOs until he exceeded 37,000 QSOs. The target was indeed



As the days wound down to one, the antennas would have to come down, but we had some unfinished business.

reached with little time to spare for the scheduled departure time to return to Rabuni. Finally, after 116 hours of operation and 37,005 QSOs we did go QRT around 05.00 UTC on April 18th. Right after switching off our last station and taking down the last of our antennas, we began our return on the eight hour drive across the trackless desert., stopping along the way for eating, drinking some tea, or

picking up some marine fossils.

Once in Rabuni and with very short time for tourism, we made a quick visit to the Saharan Refugee camp of "February 27th". Regardless of the times I have visited it, I always feel shocked about the hard living conditions those people have to face every single day of their lives, yet they always keep such a smile for you.



At the refugee camp on our last day, we are reminded, "The happiest man is not the one who HAS the most, but the one that NEEDS the least."

On the same evening as our arrival, we left Tindouf heading to Spain where we arrived at 4:00AM local time. We were amazed that despite the untimely arrival hour, the whole group of collaborators from Elche were awaiting us, ready to help with handling our bulky luggage. The next day, after a nice and recovering meal, all the S04R team began the return to their own origin places, bringing along with them the everlasting remembrance of a unique experience.

On behalf of my whole team, I'd like to thank the support received from our major sponsors: Proyecto4, NCDXF, ICOM, URE, Clipperton DXC, URE Benidorm, URE Valladolid, URE Palencia, URE San Vicente del Raspeig, EA2RCF, Spiderbeam, UFT, Viajes Eurotour, Tokyo 610 DXG, REMSAL, F6KOP, ACRACB, Hamdxgroup, K7HC, W8OU, JA5XWB, EA5XC as well as all individuals who helped us one way or another. Also we'd like to thank the support and help received from S01MZ, the Arab Saharan Democratic Republic army and its commanding chief officer of 2nd military area.

I'd like to mention, too, some other members of the "Tifariti Gang" who didn't travel with us yet who gave us their help doing the priceless work that is never seen or known but is essential to reaching our target. For all their

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help and efforts I want to thank: EA5BZ, EA5CEE, EB5BBM, EA1CJ, UY7CW, EA5ELF, EA7EU, EA5RD, EA4TD, EA5XX, and my father.

Last, but not least, we want to thank INDEXA and its officers for the support received from them.

Our sincere and deepest gratitude, to the Saharan people to whom we're dedicating all the efforts done for S04R.

Log, statistics and pictures are available at www.dxfriends.com/s04r

—73 Antonio

Antonio González, EA5RM – S04R

Translated to English by Jose M. Molero, EB5BBM and adapted by John Scott, K8YC.

Terry Morton (KJ6OW—SK)

Those who have ever checked into the INDEXA Information Session will recognize the callsign of Terry Morton (KJ6OW). We are sad to report that Terry passed away on January 19, 2010. Terry was licensed in 1985 and served on the Information Session Staff from late 2002 until about the end of 2008 when he stepped down for health reasons. Terry is survived by his wife Nadine.

Band	CW	SSB	RTTY	Band Total
10M	0	908	0	908
12M	168	905	0	1073
15M	1922	2234	0	4156
17M	2610	3176	1128	6914
20M	3275	3812	563	7650
30M	5695		694	6389
40M	3291	1862	4	5157
80M	1981	1445	0	3426
160M	1332	0	0	1332
Total	20274	14342	2389	37005

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